

## # 35 My Mother's Story

Ever since my mother died, I have been thinking about, and telling people, what a remarkable woman my mother was. As a result of the thinking and telling, I find that her story has evolved into a narrative that I hope is accurate. I wonder how my mother would view it. How accurate is it? Are parts of it embellished? So much is missing. But before I tell my story, I must tell my mother's story.

Celia (Tsirl) Goldstein was born in Vaslui Romania on November 3, 1888. Her mother's name was Malke and I believe her father's name was Jacob. I have no idea what her father did for a living. She had a sister, Sura-Leah, and a brother, Melech. My mother told me that she was apprenticed to a tailor when she was six years old. (I had no great interest in her stories about her life as a child. I never asked her questions about what she did as a little girl, besides work for the tailor; did she have friends; did she play games?) She told me that she did not go to school; that she did not learn how to read or write. Her brother did go to Cheder. My mother explained that if a Jewish family owned property (their home) they would have to pay tuition for their children to go to school. I assume her father was an observant Jew, that her mother kept a kosher home, that they all spoke Yiddish, and they knew Romanian to converse with their non-Jewish neighbors.

I have the impression that my mother loved her mother very much, but that her mother could do very little for her. I don't know if my mother was the youngest, middle or oldest child. My guess is that she was the oldest. A story that my mother told me was that there was a man in her town who managed to find out about the world outside Vaslui—that there were remarkable inventions like trains and the telegraph, and a remarkable place like America. And at some point my mother decided that she wanted to go to America. It was 1904, and at the age of 16, she left. I can not conceive of the strength it must have taken to leave your family and head into the unknown. According to my mother, there were groups of young people being formed called "Fees Gayers" (literally feet goers) who walked from town to town heading for the closest port cities where they would get on the boats that were going to America. They were underwritten by a French charitable organization called Alliance Israelite. What did she take besides the clothes on her back? I have her birth certificate, so she must have taken that. She must have also been given a paper with the names and addresses of relatives and others from Vaslui (landsleit) who were already in America.

She obviously made it to some port, found her way onto a boat and ended up in Toronto, Canada. I believe there were at least two families that my mother knew, and she must have stayed with one of them. One was the sister of my mother's sister's husband, or future husband. To clarify: My mother's sister, Sura Leah, was married to Hersh Leib Goldstein. They may have been related, having the same name. His sister had married and was living in Toronto. There was another family which may or may not have been related. (Check.)

My mother went to work at Eaton's Department store as, I believe, an alteration tailor. Her story as I remember it: The foreman came to her after she had been working there

for several months and said to her (in Yiddish, of course): “Miss Goldstein, you have to come in to work tomorrow.” My mother replied, “I told you that I don’t work on Saturdays.” He answered that he is telling her to be there tomorrow, and she had better be there. She then told him to give her her money. She is leaving. He then backed off, saying, OK, you don’t have to work Saturdays. She responded that she wants her money; she is leaving, because if he asked her now, knowing that she does not work on Shabbes, he will ask her again when he needs her again. That is why she is quitting.

She made her way to Pittsburgh where she had the name of another “lantsman.” I don’t know who it was or what she did there or how long she lived in Pittsburgh. I know she then came to New York and stayed with some more “lantsleit” Mr. and Mrs. Nerenstein. And she, along with tens of thousands of other young Jewish immigrant women, worked in the sweatshops, making the cloaks and suits and skirts and dresses that clothed America’s women. My mother was a cloak finisher. She did the hand sewing of the garment after the operator stitched it together. She was a piece-worker, getting paid by the number of garments she produced. I remember a conversation we had when I entered the ILGWU Training Institute in 1950, a year before she died. She maintained that piece-work was actually better for the worker since it enabled the younger, faster worker to make more, but didn’t threaten the older, slower worker, since her earnings were based on what she produced. The employer wasn’t inclined to get rid of her, which he might do if she was paid week-work. (Still, if he was interested in “production” the slower worker was not producing as much. But if the older worker had been employed for some time...)

Here we are, on the lower east side, living with the Nerensteins on Allen Street and working in a sweatshop not too far away. It is 1908-1909. My mother is 20 years old. Again, I have no idea what her life is like. Who are her friends? What does she do for recreation when she has a little free time? Does she go to the Yiddish theatre? How is she adjusting to her new life? When did she connect with our other relatives—Beryl and Yetta Goldstein and Sigmund and Hanna Moskowitz? How is she corresponding with her family in Vaslui?

Another piece of her story that I remember: It was 1910 and the waistmakers had had a long and bitter strike which finally resulted in a contract between the waistmakers union and the employers’ association the year before. The cloakmakers held a meeting at Cooper Union to decide what they should do. I don’t know if my mother was at that meeting or not. I do know that she was actively involved when her shop went out on strike. She was a strong supporter of her union, Local 9, Cloak Finishers, International Ladies Garment Workers Union. And soon after the successful completion of the strike, and a contract was negotiated with the employers, my mother was elected shop chairlady.

It is now 1911. My mother is caught up in her union work and is an active and articulate union member. She shared with me the following story: She had taken the floor at a union meeting and had spoken at length on a particular motion. (The meetings of Local 9 and most of the ILGWU’s local were in Yiddish.) At the end of the meeting, a member approached her and asked if she had read an article by a certain writer who held a position similar to the one she expressed. She indicated that she had not read the article or

his writings. The next day she found a “melamed” a teacher, in order to learn how to read Yiddish. (I initially thought that she only learned to read Yiddish, but I have since found items containing writing in Yiddish which must be hers. However, I have no memory of my mother using written Yiddish.)

From this period up until she married, my mother was working as a finisher and was active in her local, as shop chairlady and running for executive board member. Over the succeeding years, she developed an interest in the Yiddish theatre, became a regular reader of the Yiddish newspaper, *The Day*, (she considered the *Forward* a paper that talked down to its readers) and read a number of Yiddish journals, the *Tsukumft*, the *Groise Kundis*, and began to buy Yiddish books.)

On 1916, my parents married. I have a copy of their *Ketubah* and their wedding pictures. I have no idea how my parents met. Was there a matchmaker? Did a mutual friend introduce them? Were they in love? What kind of a wedding did they have? Did they have a honeymoon? Did they find an apartment or did my mother move into the apartment that my father had? After the wedding, was it understood that my mother would no longer work? When did they leave the lower east side for Harlem? When did they leave Harlem for the Bronx?

A remark that my mother made when she was particularly bitter was “ There were only 15 happy years in my life.” What was clear to me was that she was saying the 15 years that were her married years were her only happy years. Not her childhood, not the years after she came to America, not the years after my father died.